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Art and Crime (and Other Things Besides …): Conceptualising Graffiti in the City

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Abstract

In this paper, we critically review the literature on graffiti and street art with a view to bridging the divide between the stark extremities of public graffiti discourse. We make the case for moving beyond singular responses to the challenges posed by graffiti – into the complex terrain between visions of a city free from graffiti and one where public art has free rein. To this end, we have chosen a series of interrogations of common dialectical positions in talk of graffiti: is it art or crime; is it public or private expression; is it necessarily ephemeral, or does it seek permanence; is it a purely cultural practice, or is it economic? Our list is by no means exhaustive, but it does go some way to uncovering the complexity of graffiti's dynamic and contested geographies.

Introduction

Graffiti has become a modern touchstone of urban discontent, a global popular culture phenomena that drives urban managers to distraction. Beyond all the myriad ways we can approach intellectual discussions of graffiti, the public discussion so often distils to a simple dialectic – the virtuous who uphold the property rights of citizens versus the criminals who seek to destroy the urban fabric. That the perpetrators of graffiti crimes are invisible, obscured behind the street tags graffiti writers use, and yet ever-present in the forms of youth cultural styles – the 'hoodies' and sneakers that have global popularity among young urban men and women – has made them an easy target in politically charged debates about the city on the cusp of the 21st century. The lack of a cohesive voice and presence among those involved in graffiti as well as those who support aspects of the subculture of graffiti, has allowed politicians and media outlets relatively free rein to wage a succession of 'wars on graffiti' (Dickenson 2008; Iveson 2010), marshalling their forces through the media and public policy, against people whose medium for comment is not the newspaper and the television, but the urban fabric itself, its static and moving surfaces.

What has resulted is a kind of Foucaultian governmentality where urban anti-graffiti policies in many cities express an uncontested criminalisation of graffiti and its producers, creating a public sphere where dissent from the dominant anti-graffiti position is collapsed into generalisations of criminality and anti-social behaviour. For many researchers working with and writing about graffiti in the contemporary city, the strength of the public anti-graffiti discourse has concrete implications for the type of research we do and the way that research is supported, recognised and consumed, both within the academy and beyond. It is often assumed that by taking the time to investigate graffiti, we have chosen sides in the rhetorical urban conflict. As in other battlegrounds, the 'wars on graffiti'

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being waged in various cities often demand we 'choose sides' – are you with us or against us. When our comments are sought, we are the 'supporters of graffiti', harbouring the enemy in times of 'zero tolerance'. With predictable regularity, researchers are asked to justify the presence of the worst instances of vandalism and intolerance – the tag on a shop window, the racist insult on a schoolyard wall. And with similar predictability we reply, 'it's more complex than that'. A critical understanding of the forms of graffiti and the practices of those who do graffiti marks the divide between public discourse and much of the academic work on graffiti and street art.

Moral codes are revealed whenever their limits are transgressed (Matless 2000). Thus graffiti, as a transgressive performance in space, tells us much of the ways space is configured, constructed and reproduced in the city. Graffiti, as a spatial practice that draws attention to the complex processes at work in the social, cultural and political construction of urban space, has long been of interest to geographers. Since the formative work of Ley and Cybriwsky (1974) investigating gang graffiti in Philadelphia as territorial markers, the spatial politics of graffiti has been investigated by a succession of geographers (e.g. Bandaranaike 2001; Cresswell 1992, 1996; Dickens 2008a,b; Fuller et al. 2003; Iveson 2007, 2009; Keith 2005; Nandrea 1999; Smith 2000). However, there has not been any systematic attempt to date to trace these geographies of graffiti and to place this spatial work within the context of research by sociologists, criminologists and cultural studies scholars, who often evoke the spatial in their graffiti research.

In this paper we hope to cover some of the complex terrain that exists in graffiti research, covering work that seeks to bridge the divide between the stark extremities of public graffiti discourse and inform the spatial and social politics of graffiti. In order to highlight the different ways researchers have approached the problematic of urban graffiti we have structured the paper through a series of interrogations of common dialectical positions in talk of graffiti. Just as Cresswell asked us if graffiti was in place or out of place, we ask is it art or crime; is it public or private; is it cultural or is it economic; should it be ephemeral or permanent? In each case, we argue that graffiti cannot be located exclusively on one side or the other of such dualisms. Approaching the problematic of urban graffiti through a number of intellectual dualisms subverts the simplistic polemics that so often dominates public discourse (see Mol and Law 2002) and goes some way to uncovering the way researchers respond to and negotiate this complex terrain in their work on graffiti.

Before we go on it is necessary to, at least minimally, cover what we mean when we say graffiti. Despite the tendency in the regulation of urban space to treat graffiti as a singular form, in reality graffiti extends through many different forms, with writers and artists informed by myriad motivations (see Figure 1). By far the most recognisable global form of graffiti, and the most comprehensively discussed in the literature, is that which has been called hip hop graffiti. Scholars such as Ferrell (1996, 2001) and MacDonald (2001) point to a coherent subculture based on their own ethnographic observations of hip hop graffiti practice 'at the wall' and the 'quotidian dimensions' of the lives of hip hop graffiti writers (see also Austin 2001; Castleman 1982; Halsey and Young 2006 and Hebdidge 1979). Hip hop graffiti is often portrayed as one component of a wider 'hip hop culture' that revolves around rap, dance and graffiti. Other forms of graffiti include political graffiti, latrinalia (graffiti in toilets), and racist or gang graffiti, as well as the contemporary street art movements that include paste-ups and stickers in addition to spray paint styles that derive from earlier forms of graffiti. Both street art and hip-hop graffiti have been at the fore of the global popularisation of graffiti as a cultural form, with styles referenced from one city to another in globally extending webs of subcultural relations.

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Fig. 1. A variety of styles. An example of graffiti, this 'piece' (from masterpiece) by multiple graffiti writers combines different letter styles along with abstract imagery often associated with the emerging 'street art' movement. Manchester, UK. Photo: Cameron McAuliffe.

For this reason hip hop graffiti and, to a lesser extent, street art, are represented in the bulk of work by social scientists and humanities scholars interested in the workings of graffiti.

Art and Crime

> Is graffiti art or vandalism? That word has a lot of negative connotations and it alienates people, so no, I don't like to use the word 'art' at all. (Bansky)

Is graffiti art or crime? It would be difficult to over-state the dominance of this question in popular discussions about graffiti in the urban environment. As the quote by the street artist Banksy playfully reveals, discussions of graffiti which start with this dualistic premise that it is either art or crime rapidly reach an impasse. This is not because one position is right and the other is wrong, but because both positions are (partly) right. The 'or' in this question implies that 'art' and 'crime' are mutually exclusive categories – graffiti can only be one or the other. We want to suggest that it might be both.

Those who assert that graffiti is crime, pure and simple, can point to the fact that graffiti is frequently written without permission and is against the law. In making this point, they are right. But what kind of crime is graffiti, and what is at stake in its criminalisation? The framing of graffiti as crime is based upon a particular understanding of its relation to the moral and legal order of place – this is what geographer Tim Cresswell (1992) has called the 'crucial where of graffiti'. Cresswell differentiates between the form and process of graffiti, asking whether graffiti is still graffiti if it is taken from its illegal context on the walls of the city and placed in a gallery. In seeking to justify the link between graffiti and criminality, politicians and media commentators frequently draw upon the so-called 'broken windows' theory of urban disorder and crime. In its most basic form, the broken windows theory states that if a window in a building is broken and is left unrepaired, all the rest of the windows will soon be broken; that by breaking the codes of order we invite further disorder to occur. Wilson and Kelling (1982), drawing on Glazer's (1979) earlier article on the social effects of graffiti on the New York subway, apply the broken windows theory to graffiti, noting that the presence of graffiti represents unresolved disorder that sends the message that nobody cares, encouraging

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further erosion of community values and expectations. Here, the apparently minor crime of graffiti is cast as a transgressive invasion into the normative patterns of urban living which will have pernicious effects if it is left unchecked.

And so, mirroring the spread of hip-hop graffiti from its origins in Philadelphia and New York in the 1970s (Austin 2001; Mailer and Naar 1974), anti-graffiti laws have proliferated in cities fighting a succession of 'wars on graffiti' (Austin 2001; Dickenson 2008; Iveson 2007, 2009, 2010). The legal apogee of these battles has been the formulation of 'zero tolerance' policies towards graffiti, which have spread from their origin in Mayor Giuliani's New York of the 1990s to cities around the world. This pattern of legal interventions backed up by the exhortations of local politicians has constructed a dominant visioning of the graffiti vandal. In the realm of discourse, the 'graffiti vandal' has become ubiquitous as this term is increasingly inscribed in anti-graffiti policies and laws, and circulates through the popular media, helping to construct the normative existence of graffiti as crime, and the graffiti writer as criminal (Ferrell 1996).

Whether graffiti, and other forms of urban disorder, actually perpetuate crime remains contested. A number of researchers suggest that the broken windows theory over-emphasises the causal link between minor instances of anti-social behaviour and more serious crimes (e.g. Harcourt 2001; Sampson and Raudenbush 1999; Taylor 2001). Other research has supported the assertion that disorder, such as the presence of graffiti, spreads through neighbourhoods (Keizer et al. 2008; see Thacher 2004 for a discussion of this literature). Yet others have argued that attempts to eradicate graffiti through anti-graffiti laws have tended to displace and transform graffiti rather than remove it altogether, with writers responding by adjusting their geographical tactics to identify new spaces and opportunities for their work (Ferrell and Weide 2010). The shift to zero tolerance and the threat of increasingly harsh penalties has failed to deter graffiti writers. Indeed, with increased risk comes increased reward within subcultural circles where illegal and risky actions produce fame and respect. For writers who crave the fame associated with the battles fought, and the scars that persist once the fumes have settled, in the ongoing wars on graffiti, zero tolerance becomes a challenge (Ferrell and Weide 2010; MacDonald 2001).

Now, those who have advocated for the criminalisation of graffiti generally refuse to engage with the important question of what graffiti actually says or looks like – from this perspective, illegal graffiti is just crime, regardless of whether it is beautiful, hateful, insightful or dull. Indeed, one can only maintain the position that graffiti is crime and not art by doggedly ignoring its content, and focusing only on its location. As Joe Austin points out, the illegality of this enterprise tends to be the focus of accounts which see contemporary graffiti art as yet another form of crime:

> Graffiti artists painting and making work in the street and/or on trains have been engaged in law breaking—violations of property rather than a singular creation of aesthetic commodities and objects of ownership. It is for these reasons that it has been easier to ignore or misrepresent graffiti art's aesthetic and visionary implications than one might otherwise expect.(Austin 2010, 41)

When forced into making aesthetic judgments about content, advocates of the 'graffiti is crime and not art' position are sometimes prepared to offer grudging recognition that some graffiti writers have artistic talent. But this talent is said to be misdirected, and worse, it only encourages those without such talent to think that it is ok to write or paint on walls without permission. From this perspective, the proper place for art is in a gallery, not on someone else's property.

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On the other side of the debate, those who maintain that 'graffiti is art' tend to focus precisely on the issues of content and style which advocates of the 'graffiti is crime' position want to avoid. In making their case for the aesthetic qualities of graffiti as art, some have pointed to the fact that graffiti-style works are hung in art galleries, and that the graffiti-writing scene has spawned famous artists such as Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Sometimes, the assertion that graffiti is 'art' has been translated into alternative policies, such as the provision of 'legal walls' on which graffiti can be written with permission. These tolerated legal sites are designed to provide opportunities for engagement with writers and to facilitate the diversion of young people 'at risk' of sliding into more serious crime, as well as, importantly, limiting the urban presence of graffiti to particular sites. Legal walls present opportunities for writers to emerge from the cover of darkness, and to 'go legit' (see Figure 2). For writers moving away from deviant careers or wishing to pursue legitimate creative careers, the legal wall becomes a site of recognition, materialising the tension between public art and property crime (Halsey and Pederick 2010).

And yet, these and other efforts to define graffiti as 'art' risk overlooking the fact that graffiti does trouble established notions of what constitutes 'art'. As Austin goes on to point out, one of the defining characteristics of the new styles of graffiti that have emerged in the last 40 years is that they take place in urban public spaces. In doing so, graffiti refuses to be contained within the proper place designated for art in the city – the

Fig. 2. Legal forms of graffiti. Top: Permission Wall (Sydenham, Sydney). The graffiti writers negotiated the use of this 'permission wall' directly with the owners of the premises. Bottom: Legal Wall (Guilford, Sydney). This wall was designated a 'legal graffiti wall' by Parramatta Council in Sydney, open to all graffiti writers. Photos: Cameron McAuliffe.

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gallery or some other private space. For Austin, the illegality of this refusal represents a dramatic extension of modern art's aim to disrupt and challenge the everyday, by refusing to locate such disruptions within a space which renders them predictable. His point is that graffiti art's key contribution *as art* is fundamentally related to its illegal placement in the public spaces of the city. Indeed, he argues that 'illegally placing work on public walls is a significant contribution to, even a step forward for, modern art' (Austin 2010, 42), that by taking the art beyond the walls of the 'white cube' of the art gallery into shared public space we can incorporate sensitivities to the place/ment of art within a 'pleasurable critique of the standing order' (2010, p. 43).

From this perspective, graffiti is embraced as a way of unsettling settled visions of the city, providing space for those whose presence is not strongly represented in visions of order. Graffiti, when seen as a 'technology of expression', 'challenges the very status of language, dialogue and discourse within the public sphere' (Keith 2005, 136) working to 'make multiculture visible'. For Keith, in its very disorder graffiti becomes implicated in the urban politics of difference and racism. As such, the transgressive nature of graffiti – as both art *and* crime – can be viewed positively, as something which signals the presence of ambiguous public spaces where individuals and groups contest and negotiate their co-presence, in a condition of 'thrown-togetherness' (Amin 2010; Massey 2005). Contrary to representations of graffiti as threat, such discourses of ambivalence create room for consideration of the surprise and excitement embodied in graffiti, as an urban intervention, which contributes to distinctive communal experiences.

So, we would argue that the question of whether graffiti is art *or* crime is entirely *mis*placed. It is both, with each being necessary rather than anathema to the other. Similarly, we now want to argue that a series of other dualisms within which graffiti is often framed are also ripe for deconstruction.

Private and Public

'If mainstream society doesn't like it, they can go and get fucked'. So said Sydney-based graffiti-writer SNARL, in an interview for a documentary on Australian hip hop back in 1998 (Basic Equipment 1998). This statement tells us quite a bit about the complex relationship graffiti has to the public/private distinction.

Crudely, we can think about the public/private distinction in at least two different registers (Iveson 2007; Weintraub 1997). Graffiti is written *in* public, if we think about publicness as a form of *visibility*. Graffiti is certainly visible – all too visible, according to those who want it eradicated. But is graffiti a form of public address, if we think about publicness as a form of *collectivity*? Much contemporary graffiti is frequently described as being 'illegible' to the 'general public'. SNARL's statement is an aggressive version of the commonly articulated notion that graffiti writers use public walls to write for other graffiti writers (Lewisohn 2008). It is in this sense often described as a 'private' language or communication, written for and understood by only the community of graffiti writers (e.g. MacDonald 2001). This notion that graffiti is a 'private' communication is frequently mobilised in support of efforts to eradicate graffiti. Opponents of graffiti assert that it is a selfish, individualistic and 'private' appropriation of the public realm, and they claim to be acting on behalf of the beleaguered citizens who want to reclaim the public realm from graffiti writers on behalf of the 'general public' or 'the community' (e.g. Glazer 1979; Sennett 1994).

Interestingly, some artists who work illegally on the street have embraced this same logic. The emergent 'street art' movement increasingly seems to want to distinguish itself

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from 'graffiti writers' on the basis that 'street art' seeks to engage a wider public audience, while 'graffiti' is written only for those 'in the know' (Lewisohn 2008). This distinction is premised on the claim that different styles are accessible to different publics. While 'street art' and 'graffiti' might share the 'public' space of the street, the desire of 'street artists' to reach a wider public is reflected in the use of letter styles which are more obviously legible and iconography which references popular culture and even the visual language of advertising (Manco 2004; see Figure 3).

However, this notion that graffiti is a form of 'private' address is highly problematic. It relies on a liberal idealisation of a mythical 'general public' that is apparently universally

Fig. 3. Addressing different publics. Top: 'Street art', Mays Lane, St Peters, Sydney; Middle: 'public style' graffiti with clear letter forms on a legal wall, Guilford, Sydney; Bottom: 'wild style' graffiti on a legal wall, Rydalmere, Sydney. Photos: Cameron McAuliffe.

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upset by graffiti due to its illegibility and its placement. As a range of critical theorists have argued, such framings of the 'general public' are ideological manoeuvres which serve to mask the many ways in which claims to universality work to privilege particular interests over others (Fraser 1995; Warner 2002; Young 1990). Like all counterpublic spheres, the graffiti-writing public sits uncomfortably within the liberal ideology of public and private (Iveson 2007). The attack on graffiti as a 'private' communication perhaps serves to illustrate the extent to which liberal and neoliberal conceptions of 'the public' are premised on certain configurations of private property.

Yet, as noted above, it is not only graffiti's critics who label it a 'private' communication. When writers say that they are writing to and for other writers, it seems to us that they are making a point about the *style* of their particular form of public address. Manipulation of the letter form is central to some schools of graffiti writing, most notably those associated with hip hop culture. The capacity to master certain styles of manipulation, and to invent new forms, is one of the core aesthetic criteria by which quality and originality are measured within the graffiti-writing counterpublic. Connections between letters and embellishments are crucial dimensions of a good tag, and in so-called 'wild style' pieces letters are scrambled almost beyond any recognition (see Figure 3). So, when graffiti writers say that they are writing for other writers, they are asserting that the aesthetic criteria by which their efforts should be judged are those that have been developed within the graffiti-writing counterpublic sphere – not those that are imposed externally on behalf of the mythical 'general public'. As with *all* forms of public address, these criteria developed within the graffiti-writing counterpublic sphere work to both include and exclude simultaneously (Warner 2002). This is no less true of graffiti written on a wall than it is of an article written in a newspaper. And like all forms of public address, graffiti always escapes the intentions of its authors. Precisely because graffiti is written on public walls and documented in other media, anyone can potentially take the time to 'learn' this particular language and style – be they sympathetic or hostile to graffiti.

In light of this analysis, the question of whether graffiti is 'public' or 'private' is really a matter of the different audiences for whom graffiti is written and to whom it is accessible, and how these audiences are imagined and experienced. Here, both the style and placement of graffiti will impact on (though not fully determine) the extent of its audience (Ferrell and Weide 2010). Although a piece of graffiti or street art may be written for a 'general audience', this does not mean the geographical and stylistic criteria which render it accessible are necessarily foreign to the criteria established within the graffiti-writing counterpublic (Halsey and Pederick 2010).

Culture and Economy

'Keep it real'. In hip-hop culture especially, it's hard to over-state the centrality of this phrase. In the face of the rampant commercialisation of culture, 'keep it real' is an incitement not to 'sell out' the culture for a quick buck. And yet, graffiti has never really existed in a purely 'cultural' form. Indeed, in graffiti we have a textbook illustration of the difficulties of ever really separating culture from economy (Castree 2004).

Graffiti might have been 'born of the streets'. But the fact that 'born of the streets' is also the name of a gallery exhibition about graffiti put on by the Foundation Cartier in Paris tells us something about graffiti's current status in the wider cultural economy. You can see graffiti on the sets of music videos, television shows and movies. You can see it in advertising campaigns and corporate logos. You can see it in magazines and glossy coffee-table books. You can see it in small art galleries and grand municipal museums. You

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can see it on t-shirts and on screen-prints. You can even attend corporate team building exercises run by graffiti writers! And this is to say nothing of the burgeoning market in spray paint, marker pens and other graffiti-related equipment – all sold through specialist graffiti outlets both online and in the high street (or at least the back alley) (see Figure 4).

So, it might be true that writing illegal graffiti for an audience of other graffiti writers offers a way to establish a kind of cultural capital within the graffiti-writing public sphere (see Public and Private above). But it is now common for that cultural capital to be leveraged for financial capital by individual graffiti writers, who themselves are often participating in corporate or municipal efforts to leverage graffiti's cultural capital for branding projects – including efforts to position corporations or places in relation to the so-called 'creative economy'. In fact, the rise of the creative economy sees the deviant careers of graffiti writers (Lachmann 1988) increasingly overlapping with legitimised (even valorised) career paths involving their emergence as members of the creative class (Florida 2002; Landry 2000).

High profile graffiti writers and crews form relationships with spray paint companies through *ad hoc* and more enduring paint contracts, can be sponsored to attend invitational events and are often the subject of articles in the graffiti magazines that have grown with the subculture. While most of these relations are locally embedded, the increased circulation of images in books and magazines and via the internet has fostered a transnational flow of writers, invited for events and on personal journeys to paint in other cities around the world, producing a complex global geography of graffiti and street art tied in interesting ways with the rise of creative cities. Of course, the criminalisation of graffiti (see Art and Crime above) has also helped to push some graffiti writers into the formal economy, where legal commissions provide an important opportunity for writers to continue to practice and develop their craft.

The question of how to 'keep it real', then, is a serious question, but one which is more likely to be answered by taking a position on a continuum from 'cultural' to 'economic' uses of graffiti. And this question is likely to be answered differently by different writers, depending on how they conceive of their graffiti-writing 'career'. Despite the

Fig. 4. Graffiti markets. Spray paint companies specialise in brands for graffiti writers. Cans of paint can be bought through specialist stores or online. Photo: Cameron McAuliffe.

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presence of commercial and legal options, the fact remains that many graffiti writers embrace illegality as an implicit part of graffiti practice. The transgressive thrill of graffiti (de Certeau 1984; Cresswell 1996) challenges the value of legal work, whether it be on a legal wall, a canvas in a gallery, or a commercial commission (Cresswell 1992). Graffiti writers and street artists negotiate their multiple subjectivities as legal and illegal, as 'artists' and 'vandals', as legitimate and illegitimate actors among their different social networks and audiences, in the ever-changing interplay of the politics of recognition occurring at the edges of inclusion, reflecting the complexity that figures graffiti as both art and crime.

Here, we think it is important to recognise the diversity of economic practices involving graffiti writing (Gibson-Graham 1996). Many graffiti writers and street artists have devoted considerable time and effort to finding ways of selling their skills and products in ways that do not 'sell out' their culture (Dickens 2010). Inevitably, their efforts generate debate (often heated!) within the graffiti-writing counterpublic sphere. That is as it should be. But perhaps one of the features of the graffiti-writing scene that makes it of particular interest in this respect is that one individual can potentially have several graffiti-writing identities in circulation – one for commercial use, one for legal walls, one for illegal work, etc. Here, the invisible–visible nature of graffiti writing potentially affords new kinds of responses to the fraught culture–economy interface.

Ephemeral and Permanent

Much graffiti is written in the knowledge that it will not last forever – this is one of the conditions that shapes it as a form of public address. And yet, graffiti writers and urban authorities are constantly engaged in battles over the degree of ephemerality and permanence which can be achieved by different forms of graffiti (see Figure 5).

Of course, many urban authorities and property owners have sought to prevent graffiti writing. But their anti-graffiti efforts have also involved the deployment of a wide range of techniques and technologies designed to shorten the life of graffiti. The cleaning or 'buffing' of graffiti has been facilitated by the development of easy-clean and/or graffiti-resistant materials. Graffiti hotlines have been set up encouraging citizens to report graffiti, and private contractors are increasingly engaged in 'rapid removal' efforts to clean reported graffiti within hours of its appearance. Such measures are designed to discourage graffiti by making it more ephemeral, in the hope that this will remove the exposure-based reward structure which is said to underpin the graffiti-writing subculture.

In the face of these efforts, graffiti writers and artists have developed several strategies for prolongation (Brighenti, 2010). Most significantly, the camera has emerged as a crucial piece of graffiti-writing equipment, every bit as important as the spray can or the marker pen. Pictures of graffiti captured just after it has been completed enable its subsequent mediation and circulation. Regardless of how rapidly a particular instance of graffiti is buffed, a picture can circulate among friends and colleagues, be published online or in a graffiti magazine, or even make an appearance in a best-selling book. This capture and mediated prolongation of modern graffiti has been absolutely crucial to its development and growth. The very emergence of new forms of graffiti writing in New York during the 1970s is frequently put down to one such instance of mediation. A picture of a subway tag by 'Taki 183' published in the *New York Times* ensured Taki a degree of fame unprecedented to that date, and appears to have encouraged many others to emulate his efforts (Austin 2001; Dickenson 2008). The choice of graffiti-writing implements also has an impact on its prolongation. Paint seems more permanent than ink, which in turn

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Fig. 5. Dynamics of a 'legal' wall. This legal wall changes every weekend with writers often lining up to take their turn. In the final two frames, the wall's legal status has been rescinded. Photos: Cameron McAuliffe.

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seems more permanent than chalk. When paint-resistant materials were developed, some writers turned to etching and acid to make their mark. And of course, good old-fashioned persistence is another strategy that graffiti writers have used to deal with ephemerality – returning to surfaces each time they are buffed to drop a new tag, sticker or throw-up.

As a means of addressing the potential ephemerality of graffiti, each of these strategies has an impact on the kind of graffiti that gets written. On the one hand, use of the camera and mediation has meant that graffiti writers can invest significant time and materials on their work, knowing that it will not be 'lost' even if it is removed rapidly. On the other hand, the kind of work that can be etched into glass with a sharp object is far less complex than the kind of work that can be achieved with paint, chalk or ink. And the kind of work that can be quickly and repetitively executed also tends to be less elaborate. For this reason, several commentators have observed that graffiti eradication efforts tend not to eradicate graffiti, but rather to change its form and style (Austin 2001; Ferrell and Weide 2010; Iveson 2009).

Further, attempts to eradicate graffiti often merely displace it, as writers and artists shift their attention to other walls, as was the case in New York, where graffiti shifted from trains to the wider urban landscape in response to the anti-graffiti push on the subways (Dickenson 2008). In other cases graffiti has been secured in place, such as when 'legal walls' are capped with graffiti-proof sealants, in order to prevent other writers from painting over them (see Figure 6) (Halsey and Pederick 2010; see also Art and Crime) .

Furthermore, there have even been instances of graffiti by famous artists being protected through heritage controls because of the character that they lend to an urban area (Dickens 2008b; MacDowall 2006; Young 2010; see also Culture and Economy). The stencil work and street art of British artist Banksy, possibly the most well-known contemporary graffiti writer/street artist, has gained such value as a commodity that the work on some of his walls is now protected under the aegis of urban heritage (Dickens 2008a). Conversely, legal walls can become illegal as zero tolerance strategies come to replace harm-minimisation strategies in the cycle of tough-on-crime politics (see Figure 7) (Iveson 2007; Young 2010).

Fig. 6. Crime becomes art. This piece, by a local Sydney writer, SWAZE and a visiting Mexican writer, PEQUE, is part of a Street Art Gallery in the suburb of Miller, in south western Sydney. Graffiti-proof sealants have been used in this case to protect the artwork from tags. Photo: Cameron McAuliffe.

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Notice
Graffiti is prohibited by Council on this wall and other structures within this park in accordance with Section 632 of the Local Government Act 1993.
A penalty not exceeding $2,000 applies.
By Order
Chief Executive Officer
Parramatta City Council
Notice

Fig. 7. From legal to illegal. Top: This 'legal wall' in Sydney becomes an illegal wall with the addition of a sign; Bottom: Graffiti tags respond to the imposition of zero tolerance on this formerly 'legal wall'. Photos: Cameron McAuliffe.

Conclusion

Graffiti transgresses norms of power and control in urban spaces. It is a part of the 'subversive space work' of young people in the face of attempts by powerful adults to define and impose cultural space (Ferrell 1996). Graffiti disrupts the aesthetic fabric of the urban environment, writing its own story across spaces not intended to act as a communication medium – the walls and ceilings of the city, and trains and trucks that travel through it. It also subverts property relations and the commodification of urban space, by appearing on private property and on the billboards and signs that are managed by the state or have been delimited through economic transactions. It represents disorder and mobilises moral panics about youths out of place in the city. These distinctive geographies of graffiti challenge us to clarify distinctions between public and private, between legitimate and illegitimate expression, between legal and illegal activities in the city, between art and crime.

How should we, as researchers, respond to such challenges? Should we advocate for one side or the other as we join in attempts to delimit the city? In this paper we have tried to move beyond singular responses to the challenges posed by graffiti – into the complex terrain between visions of a city free from graffiti and one where public art has free rein. As we mentioned in the introduction, the public discussion of graffiti and street art so often distils to a simple dialectic – the virtuous who uphold the property rights of

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citizens versus the criminals who seek to destroy the urban fabric. It is not difficult to see that the 'clean city' and the 'graffiti' that disrupts it are a single historical invention – one is a purification that was only made possible by designating and expelling the other (Mol and Law 2002, 5). In discussing the complexity that exists between the poles of public polemics it is important to see that not only is the clean city a simplification, but so too is graffiti. Just as there is no singular way of framing or viewing graffiti, so too there is no single graffiti writer. The art on the wall and those who produce it are riven with multiple subjectivities – a fact not often emphasised in literatures that seek to uncover the true lives of graffiti writers, or classify the types of graffiti they do. To insist on this complexity does not preclude advocacy on behalf of graffiti and graffiti writers. But our analysis does suggest that advocates should not simply invert the dominant framing of graffiti as a crime to be eradicated with a simplistic endorsement of 'graffiti' *per se* – precisely because there is no such 'thing' as graffiti or a typical 'graffiti writer'.

In part, our project in this paper has been to enunciate the multiple orders that exist between the simplified dialectic of the presence and absence of graffiti in the city. However, it is not enough to tread the well-established path of the critique of simplification by merely claiming that things are more complex than they seem. While we have railed against the simplistic polemics that rule public debate about graffiti and street art, we have attempted to move beyond this 'comfortable place' in our analysis. As Mol and Law write,

> the trope of a single order that reduces complexity … starts to lose its power when order is multiplied, when *order* turns into *orders* … When investigators start to discover a variety of orders … then the dichotomy between simple and complex starts to dissolve. (2002, p. 7)

By enunciating multiple analytical frames through which we can approach the presence and absence of graffiti we have attempted to dig in to the complexity at the edges. But the strength in this analysis, we believe, comes from the existence of not a single alternative framing, but through recognition that all of these frames operate simultaneously to produce complex fields of enquiry.

Our list of alternative frames through which to view the presence/absence of graffiti is not exhaustive. We do not seek to foreclose the debate. But if we are to have a debate at all we need to move beyond the simplifications and into the complex, where multiple ways of viewing the problems and possibilities of graffiti exist simultaneously. For researchers working on issues related to graffiti and street art it is not enough to say it is complex, but to attempt to understand how this complex terrain operates across time and, for geographers, across space.

Short Biographies

Cameron McAuliffe is a social and cultural geographer researching a range of topics concerned with issues of inclusion, recognition and difference. His research has primarily concerned the lives of young people, with a focus on identity, cultural diversity and transnationalism. He has critiqued the methodological nationalism of transnationalism research in papers in the journals *Global Networks* and *Australia Geographer*, and published book chapters on religious and national identities in the Iranian diapsora. Cameron is currently the UWS Children's Futures Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney. His fellowship research, under the title Informal Pathways to Belonging, is concerned with the lives of creative young people in Western Sydney. As a part of this research Cameron has developed the Writing

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Ways project, investigating the viability of legal graffiti and the operation of moral geographies around graffiti practice. He holds Bachelor's degrees in Arts (Human Geography) and Engineering (Chemical) as well as a PhD in Human Geography, all from the University of Sydney.

Kurt Iveson's research is located at the intersection of urban and political geography. His 2007 book *Publics and the City* developed a framework for considering the urban dimensions of the public sphere, and this framework was applied to a series of case studies which explored the struggle for space involved in efforts to produce and regulate different forms of publicness. He has also published papers in journals including *Antipode*, *City*, *Gender Place and Culture*, the *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, *Australian Geographer*, and *Urban Policy and Research*. He has also edited a Special Feature on Graffiti, Street Art and the City for the journal *City* in 2010, and contributed the entry on graffiti for the Sage Encyclopedia of Urban Studies. Before taking up his current position in Urban Geography at the University of Sydney, he was a lecturer in Social and Cultural Geography at the University of Durham (UK). He holds a Bachelor of Economics (Social Science) from the University of Sydney and a PhD in Urban Research from the Australian National University.

Note

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